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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of religion in the lives of older adults living in the classic community setting of Middletown, U.S.A. It examined the patterns and relationships between religious attendance and activity, sex, health, income, and age with regard to the sense of subjective well-being as expressed by older Middletowners. Data were obtained from a random sample of 400 persons, 60 years of age and older. A multiple regression analysis was performed initially on seven variables (church attendance, religious activity, subjective health status, satisfaction with income, education, age, and sex) to examine their relationship to life satisfaction. Data analysis revealed that three variables (subjective health status, satisfaction with income, and church attendance) accounted for the vast majority of variance in life satisfaction. Religious activities did not show any direct effect on life satisfaction. Age, sex, health, and religious activity, but not education, all influenced church attendance. Age and education affected health, which also influenced religious activity and church attendance. Sex was related to education, which in turn influenced satisfaction with income. In examining the role of church attendance, it was revealed that while church attendance was related to life satisfaction, matters of health and perceived adequacy of income played a stronger role. (Author/NB)

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The Effects of Church Attendance and Religious Activities Upon the Life Satisfaction of Older Adults in Middletown, U.S.A.

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ABSTRACT

The central focus of this study is to examine the patterns and relationships which may or may not exist between religious attendance and activity, sex, health, income, and age with regard to the sense of subjective well-being as expressed by older Middletowners. Based on a random sample of 400 persons, 60 years of age and older, a multiple regression analysis reveals that three variables account for the vast majority of variance in life satisfaction. Those variables are: SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS; SATISFACTION WITH INCOME and CHURCH ATTENDANCE. For those three variables R=.4780; R^2=.2284. When all seven independent variables were included R=.4851 R^2=.2351. In addition, further analysis was undertaken to examine the interrelationships between the seven independent variables.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Some time ago, Hoover (1976) asked, "Were There Any Older People in Middletown?" This question, of course, is directed to the Lynds' classic community studies, Middletown and Middletown in Transition. Hoover notes that the Lynds showed "scant interest in the roles or the problems of the older people in Muncie in 1924-25" (p. 11). They did make a few observations on leisure (the young dance and the old people play cards) and on older people as workers, but they did not consider older workers as being worthy of a separate study.

Hoover comments that older persons are mentioned briefly in the section on community activities and "Caring for the Unable." In Middletown in Transition, he observes that the Lynds had ample opportunity to delve into the lives of older people, but in most cases, they simply did not avail themselves of that opportunity.

One area, however, which does stand out in both of the classic studies is religious practices. The reader is reminded that religion is one of the six categories of activity originally chosen by the Lynds for their analysis. Those were:

1. Getting a living
2. Making a home
3. Training the young
4. Using leisure
5. Engaging in religious practices
6. Engaging in community activity

Unfortunately, much of their discussion was not well organized, was descriptive and reportorial, and concentrated on church attendance. Hoover's analysis points out that the support of church activity by older people is seen as a sign of religion's failure to reach the young. The Lynds did not determine why older people attended church or if they were motivated more by social or religious reasons. Rather, they tended to concentrate on the weakness of the religious institution, as they perceived it.

In Middletown in Transition, Hoover points out that the old were seen as the most faithful church attenders. However, the Lynds also felt that religion had little utility. They may well have believed that the old, church-going residents of Middletown were simply dupes.

Hoover's trenchant discussion concludes as follows:

"Only the very careful reader of Middletown in Transition can discover older persons in Muncie. The Lynds are quite careless in their definition of old; they use the word in several ways and the parameters of the definition are unclear. The lifestyles of the old are not discussed; their economic progression and decline is a matter of speculation but not investigation. The median old appear mainly in Muncie churches, as objects of curiosity, if not pity, clinging to an outmoded faith. For the Lynds, the very old seem not to be there" (p. 25).

Quite some time passed until Middletown was rediscovered in 1976 by Caplow and company. Over several years, this "specimen

community" was reexamined in the context of a classic community and social change. While Caplow did not focus specifically upon older adults, some aspects of the resulting analysis and discussion did include commentary on the position of older members of the community. Two of the most prominent topics which dealt with older adults are family relations and religion.

The topic of religion, aging, and related issues in Middletown is the focus of this paper. This is in keeping with one of the Lynd's original objectives (engaging in religious practices) and the more contemporary Middletown III research by Caplow. While there has been some very valuable research conducted on the impact of religion on the lives of older adults, it has been noted that, "Although the majority of elderly Americans consider religion an important influence in their lives, the subject of religion and its impact on the old person has been examined only cursorily" (Koenig et al., 1988, p. 18). Schwartz and Peterson (1979) argue that the relative lack of concern with regard to aging and older adults may reflect a conflict between the interests of those committed to the scientific method and the faith-oriented perspectives endemic to religion.

In any event, as just noted, our principal objective in this paper is to investigate the role of religion in the lives of the older members who live in the classic community setting of Middletown, U.S.A. With that objective in mind, what does the gerontological literature on aging and religion reveal, and what

does Caplow's more contemporary research on Middletown indicate on those same topics?

One of the more widely employed measures of "religiosity" is attendance. Moberg (1972) for example concludes that church attendance declines with old age although religious feelings tend to increase. The longitudinal research of Blazer and Palmore (1976) indicates a decline in religious activity with advancing age. They also feel that religion is of considerable significance for personal adjustment in old age.

While attendance and participation may not be universally accepted as all-encompassing measures of religiosity, as Moberg (1968) notes, such measures of religious behavior predominate many studies quite simply because such data is easily obtainable. Mindel and Vaughan (1978) point out that religious behaviors which are less organizational in nature such as Bible reading, religious programs on radio and TV, and private devotions demonstrate that lack of religious participation does not indicate that religion lacks significance in the lives of older people.

Ainlay and Smith (1984) found that nonorganizational religious activities are important in the lives of older adults. They note that religious activities are not terminated with advancing age; there is only partial disengagement in organizational involvement which is counterbalanced by increases in private areas of religious activity. Hunsberger (1985) finds that happiness and adjustment of older adults are related to measures of Christian orthodoxy, background religious emphasis,

agreement with beliefs taught, importance of beliefs, and church attendance.

Recently, Koenig and colleagues (1988a) observed that religious factors were significantly associated to morale. This association is independent of the influence of health, social support, or financial status. In addition, those who were 75 and over who were actively involved in religious behaviors or intrinsically committed were the ones who were much more likely (as compared to those who were less religious) to exhibit higher morale ratings. With regard to sex, women were much more likely to be involved in church and related social activities, private religious activities and score higher on intrinsic religiosity than were men. No relationships were observed between health and religious activities or attitudes; however they did note a variation in the relationship between the religiosity variables and morale which was contingent upon the respondents' perception of their health.

Other recent work by Koenig, George, and Siegler (1988b) concluded that religious activities and attitudes represented the predominant coping behaviors of older individuals. Religion seems to be a major mechanism for dealing with "sturm und drang" in later life.

It would seem that as Atchley (1988) noted, churches are the most common form of community organizational membership for older adults. While going to church and being religious may not be one and the same, religion in its various forms and postures does seem to have an appreciable impact on the lives of many older

adults. Do religious belief, involvement, and activity contribute to better adjustment, or are the better adjusted the ones who belong and are religious? In any event, although Steinitz (1980) would not agree, it appears that religion as a core institution, has an appreciable impact on the lives and life satisfaction of a significant number of older persons in our society.

RELIGION AND OLDER ADULTS IN MIDDLETOWN: SOME CURRENT BACKGROUND AND COMMENTARY

The voluminous Middletown III research endeavor by Caplow and company encompassed a wide range of issues which includes an extensive discussion of religion. Our principle concern concentrates on the role of religion, and, specifically, religious attendance and activity as they relate to the lives of older Middletowners.

Caplow (1983) notes that the Lynds did not present any quantitative data regarding the relationship between age and attendance at church. They did, however, make a number of allusions which pointed out attending church was primarily an activity of later life. Caplow's research indicates that church involvement does increase with age, especially for the middle and older ages. Regular and intermittent attendance are directly related to age whereas occasional or nevers are inversely related. It should be noted that younger adults are certainly not completely absent from services.

The Middletown III data indicates that although the differences are smaller than those observed by the Lynds, women

still attend church more often than men. In fact, the differences observed "were not impressive" (p. 76).

When Caplow examined SES types of variables, it was found that regular attenders had somewhat higher educational levels and occupational status. There were statistically significant differences between church members and nonmembers as well as low and high attenders when compared on the income variable. Active church members in modern Middletown evinced above average educational levels, occupational statuses, and incomes.

In contemporary Middletown, there was a statistically significant difference in political party and religious attendance. That is, Republicans were more likely to be high attenders; Democrats were more predisposed to low attendance.

Respondents in a number of the Middletown III surveys were asked a question dealing with their overall happiness: "Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days; would you say you are . . . Very Happy; Pretty Happy; Not too happy; Pretty or very unhappy" (p. 215)? Twice as many high attenders were very happy as were low attenders; more low attenders perceived themselves as being unhappy to some extent. It is worthwhile noting that the majority of both high and low attenders saw themselves as happy to some degree.

The central focus of this study is to examine the patterns and relationships which may or may not exist between religious attendance and activity, sex, health, income, and especially age with regard to the sense of subjective well-being as expressed by older Middletowners.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The data were obtained from 400 telephone interviews with respondents who were 60 or older (for those interested in the relative merits of different interview approaches, see Leinbach, 1982). A "Middletown Area Survey" is conducted annually by the Department of Sociology at Ball State University. The sample was selected by computer, utilizing a program which chooses phone numbers based on the proportion of exchanges and blocks which are in service throughout the Muncie/Delaware County area. This comprises the boundaries of contemporary Middletown.

Once contact was made with a household, a filter item was asked to determine if anyone in that household was 60 years of age or older. If an older adult was present, we proceeded to conduct the interview. If not, the ineligible respondent was thanked for their time and inconvenience, and the next number on the list was then called.

A number of the items in the instrument were taken from either Caplow's Middletown III study (the Kinship Survey) or the Commission on Aging Survey, a complete copy of which may be found in Babbie (1986). Some of the items were slightly modified for use in a telephone survey. For the sake of parsimony, life satisfaction was assessed by a single-item measure. Diener (1984) has noted that despite the advantage of brevity, there are some legitimate concerns about single-item measures. On the other hand, such measures usually correlate with external variables and do not seem to be especially contaminated by social

desirability. As Deiner noted, the validity and reliability of the "single-item scale" is such that they are adequate if a very brief measure of global well-being is what the researcher requires. Willits and Crider (1988) have stated that direct questions which deal with subjective well-being or health have obvious face validity. The final instrument was subjected to a pilot test before the data collection process was begun.

FINDINGS

The general characteristics of the sample are seen in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 Here)

Table 2 portrays levels of satisfaction with life and health. On life satisfaction, 75.0 percent responded Excellent or Good. Nearly 64.0 percent stated that their health was Excellent or Good.

(Insert Table 2 Here)

The data in Table 3 indicate that around 80 percent of the respondents feel that their income is at least adequate for their needs. Almost 36 percent stated that their income met their needs Well or Very Well.

(Insert Table 3 Here)

Responses to the question, "How active are you in religious activities" are seen in Table 4. Almost 56 percent indicate that they are Fairly or Very Active.

(Insert Table 4 Here)

Table 5 indicates the level of church attendance among older Middletowners. While slightly over 53 percent attend at least once a month, more than 21 percent never attend and nearly 17 percent attend more than once a week.

(Insert Table 5 Here)

Multiple regression analysis was performed initially on seven variables in order to examine their relationship to life satisfaction. Those variables are: CHURCH ATTENDANCE; RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY; SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS; SATISFACTION WITH INCOME; EDUCATION; AGE AND SEX. Satisfaction with income was employed in this analysis for two reasons, namely, there were fewer "no responses" in comparison to the income item and the perception of relative deprivation (or not) may be more important than absolute dollars per se. For this analysis, R.= .4851; R^2= .2351. Zero-order correlations between the seven independent variables and life-satisfaction are found in Table 6.

(Insert Table 6 Here)

Further analysis indicates that 3 variables account for the vast majority of the variance. Those variables are: SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS; SATISFACTION WITH INCOME AND CHURCH ATTENDANCE. For those variables, R= .4780; R^2= .2284.

COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

In terms of general characteristics, most of the sample are married (53 percent) or widowed (36.8 percent). Almost 84 percent have at least one living child. Approximately 75 percent are 60-74 years of age and 62 percent had a high school education or more. Two-thirds of the sample are females and 42.6 percent report household incomes of less than $10,000.

As previously noted, a strong majority of older Middletowners express considerable satisfaction with life and also state that they are in good health. Furthermore, most seem to feel that their income is at least adequate for their current needs.

With regard to religion, most describe themselves as being at least fairly active in religious activities; as church attenders, most attend at least once a month (44.3 percent attend once a week or more).

The three variables which account for the greatest amount of variance in life satisfaction were found to be SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS, SATISFACTION WITH INCOME, AND CHURCH ATTENDANCE. It is interesting to note that RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES did not show any direct effect on life satisfaction. Perhaps clubs, "circles,"

and other kinds of group endeavors which take place within the context of a church are not of the same value or significance as is attendance. It appears that being in good health, having an income that is satisfactory and attending one's church contribute considerably to one's overall satisfaction with life.

While AGE, EDUCATION, SEX, AND RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES made little or no direct contribution to life satisfaction, further analysis was undertaken in order to examine the inter-relationships between these variables. The results of that analysis are seen in Figure 1. AGE, SEX, HEALTH, AND RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY but not EDUCATION all influence CHURCH ATTENDANCE. AGE and EDUCATION impact on HEALTH which also influences RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY and CHURCH ATTENDANCE. SEX is related to EDUCATION which in turn influences SATISFACTION WITH INCOME.

In examining the role of church attendance then, we find that while related to life satisfaction, matters of health and perceived adequacy of income play a stronger role. Those who are relatively younger (the reader is reminded that 60 is the youngest age represented in the sample), female, in somewhat better health and more involved in religious activities are more likely to be "attenders." Thus, while church attendance is not inconsequential, it must share its role in helping to explain life satisfaction among older Middletowners with subjective assessments of health and of adequacy of income. The sacred and the secular both have an impact on the sense of subjective well-being expressed by older adults in Middletown, U.S.A.

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Table 1: Background Characteristics of the Sample

MARITAL STATUS

	N	Percent
Married	211	52.8
Widowed	145	36.3
Separated/Divorced	31	7.8
Never Married	13	3.3
TOTAL	400	100.0

AGE OF RESPONDENT

60-64	121	30.5
65-69	103	25.9
70-74	72	18.1
75-79	59	14.9
80-84	30	7.6
85 and over	12	3.0
TOTAL	397	100.0

LEVEL OF EDUCATION

No High School	65	16.3
Some High School	87	21.9
H.S. Grad/Trade Sh	152	38.2
Some College	26	6.5
College Grad or More	68	17.1
TOTAL	398	100.0

NUMBER OF LIVING CHILDREN

	N	Percent
None	65	16.3
One	66	16.5
Two	93	23.3
Three	78	19.5
Four	43	10.8
Five	17	4.3
Six	19	4.8
Seven or more	19	4.8
TOTAL	400	100.0

SEX OF RESPONDENT

Male	133	33.3
Female	267	66.8
TOTAL	400	100.0

HOUSEHOLD INCOME

$0-4,999	42	13.0
$5,000-9,999	96	29.6
$10,000-14,999	55	17.0
$15,000-19,999	35	10.8
$20,000 and over	96	29.6
TOTAL	324	100.0

Table 2: Respondent's Life Satisfaction and General Health

	Excellent		Good		Fair		Poor	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
How would you describe your general satisfaction with life at the present?	106	26.6	194	48.7	85	21.4	13	3.3
Would you say that your health today is:	88	22.0	166	41.5	111	27.8	35	8.8

Table 3: Degree of Satisfaction with Income

	Very Well		Well		Adequately		Not Very Well		Barely	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
How well do you think your income and assets meet your financial needs?	58	14.7	82	20.8	177	44.8	53	13.4	25	6.3

Table 4: How Active are You in Religious Activities?

	N	%
Not at All Active	78	14.5
Not Very Active	99	24.8
Fairly Active	127	31.8
Very Active	95	23.8
Total	399	

Table 5: How Often Do You Attend Church?

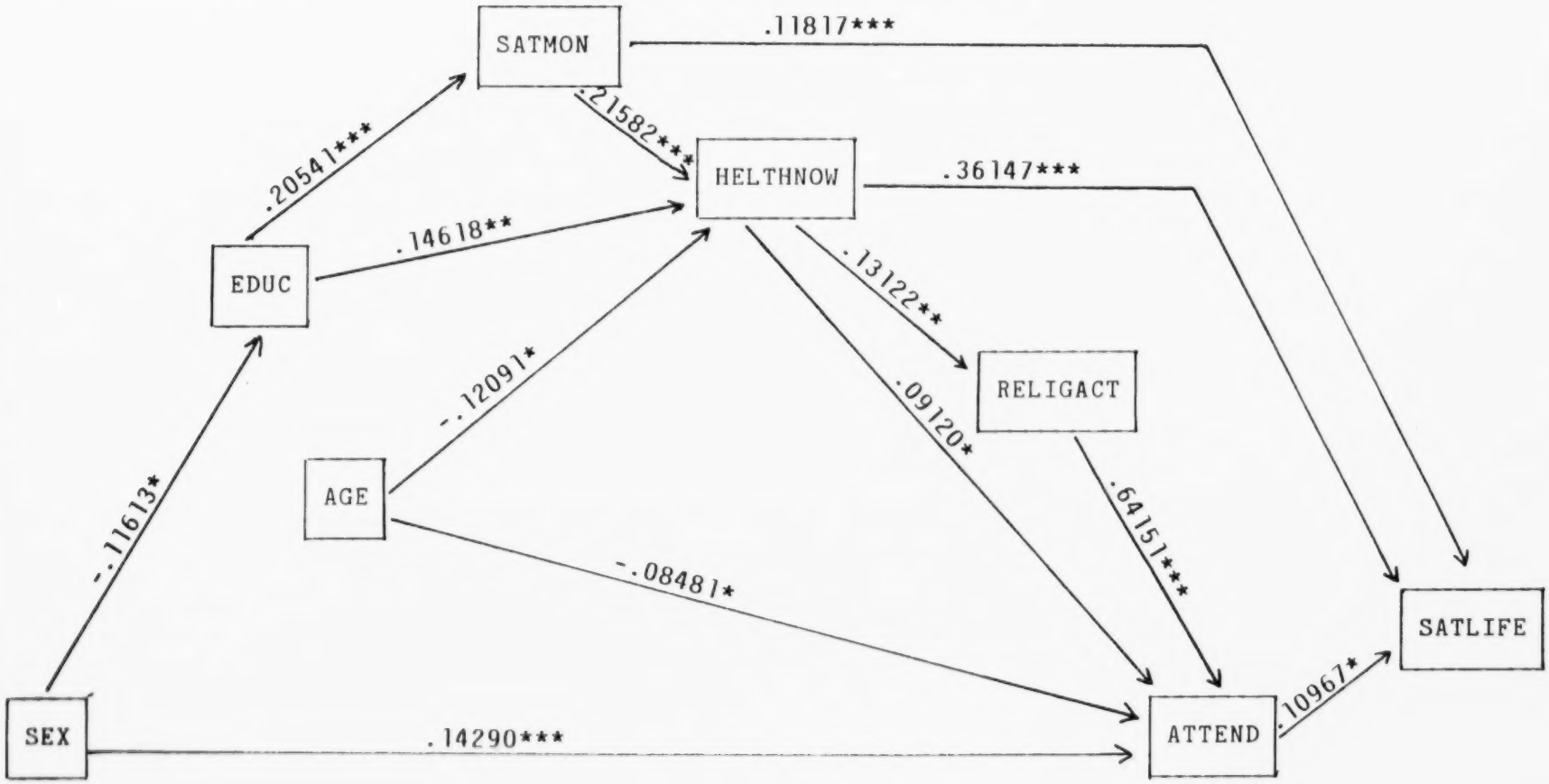
	N	%
Never	85	21.3
About Once A Year	14	3.5
A Few Times a Year	56	14.0
About Once a Month	32	8.0
More Than Once a Month	36	9.0
Once a Week	111	27.8
More Than Once a Week	66	16.5
Total	400	

Table 6: Zero-Order Correlations Between Life Satisfaction and Independent Variables

	SATLIFE	HELTHNOW	SATMON	ATTEND	RELIGACT	EDUC	AGE
HELTHNOW	.427***						
	.000						
SATMON	.284***	.245***					
	.000	.000					
ATTEND	.187***	.178***	.071				
	.000	.000	.082				
RELIGACT	.164***	.135**	.071	.661***			
	.001	.004	.080	.000			
EDUC	.121**	.201***	.204***	.095*	.059		
	.009	.000	.000	.031	.125		
AGE	-.109*	-.144**	-.030	-.077	.013	-.102*	
	.016	.002	.278	.066	.397	.022	
SEX	-.080	-.072	-.064	.166***	.055	-.112*	.078
	.058	.080	.105	.001	.141	.014	.063

SIGNIFICANCE: *.050 **.010 ***.001

FIGURE I



r age/sex = N.S.

* <= .05
** <= .01
*** <= .001

R_2 = .4851
R^2 = .2351